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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 AMMAN 003043

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SUBJECT: GENERALLY POSITIVE JORDANIAN REACTION TO POTUS
SPEECH

Classified By: Ambassador David Hale for reasons 1.4(b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary. Jordanian reaction to the President,s speech among political contacts has been generally positive, with a strong emphasis on the call for an international conference. Those we canvassed were hopeful, although with a definite "wait-and-see" approach on the parts of some and outright skepticism on the parts of others. End Summary.

Positive Official Reaction

12. (U) In a brief statement released by the Royal Court, King Abdullah welcomed the President,s call for an international conference to revive Middle East peace talks, describing it as "a step in the right direction." Local media also prominently reported that the King told President Bush by telephone "(t)he call would open the door for tangible progress in the peace process, which should lead to the establishment of an independent Palestinian state in line with a two-state solution.8

13. (C) In a conversation with the Ambassador, Foreign Minister Khatib praised the speech, expressing an eagerness to get to work on implementation, and said he was reaching out to his Arab counterparts) including Saud al-Feisal) to ensure strong Arab support. He said the calls went well except with Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa, who struck a discordant &yes, but8 note) "we must be careful.8 Khatib praised every element of the speech as well as the President,s willingness to deliver it amidst the difficult Iraq debate. Khatib also promised a stronger statement today from the government spokesman.

The Punditocracy: Focused on the International Conference

14. (C) Dr. Musa Keilani, long-time political observer and columnist, described the speech as a "master stroke." Keilani told poloff that Hamas' rise to power in Gaza is very threatening to most Jordanians, for whom Hamas is an &Arab Taliban8 government next door. Keilani saw the President,s call for an international meeting as a chance to legitimize the Arab Initiative and give Israel a face-saving way to begin dialogue with its neighbors. He described the President's move to strengthen PA President Abbas as &excellent." Per Keilani, the Jordanian street is optimistic and feels that "this time" the U.S. Administration is following the advice of King Abdullah and Abbas rather than the Israelis, while the GOI cannot object to the initiative because of the Hamas menace at their doorstep. Meanwhile, Tehran and Damascus should worry in light of this new move.

15. (C) Palestinian journalist and media activist Daoud Kuttub was generally upbeat with the caveat that "the test is in implementation.8 He singled out the mention of a viable independent Palestinian state and the statement of increased

financial support to the Palestinians, and stressed the continuing importance of strong USG rhetoric on freezing settlement activity. Baker al-Hiyari, Deputy Director of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, described the speech as "a good start," singling out the international conference as a necessary and positive development.

¶6. (C) Khalid Takhayneh, head of the Foreign Ministry,s Disarmament Section, told poloff that moderate leaders in the region would publicly and privately thank the President, as they are desperate to show progress on the Palestinian issue.

He expressed satisfaction that Abbas is "finally" getting the support he needs to be successful. Takhayneh concluded that the speech was a positive step forward but attributed the speech to the President,s desire to alleviate Iraq-related pressures, "even if for only a moment."

Hope and Skepticism

¶7. (C) Ibrahim Saif, head of the University of Jordan,s Center for Strategic Studies, called the speech a very positive step, and said that Jordanians hope to see concrete steps forward. Melding his own views with what he said he was hearing from his colleagues, he characterized the speech as "definitely serious," citing political dynamics in Iraq and Lebanon as contributing to a keen U.S. desire to generate positive movement. Saif commented that acceptance of the Arab Peace Initiative would add a new underpinning for progress towards settling the Arab-Israeli issue once and for all, while small steps on improving the lives of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza would make average Palestinians more receptive to peacemaking initiatives. Saif did sound a note of caution arising from having been "disappointed over

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and over again" regarding the two-state solution. He noted that the speech focused more on institution-building than the creation of a state, and that he would prefer a focus on statehood rather than on "political horizons."

¶8. (C) Oraib Rantawi, Director of Al-Quds Center for Political Studies, was considerably more critical (though Rantawi has been quite critical of U.S. policy for some time now). He said the speech was not a new initiative and was intended to serve not the peace process but U.S. goals of isolating Syria, Iran, and Hamas, particularly given the conditions placed on participation in the international conference. He expected that Saudi Arabia and Egypt would not be pleased because it is at cross-purposes with the Mecca Accord and Egyptian efforts to encourage dialogue and national unity. Ultimately, said Rantawi, the initiative will generate only partial coordination between Abbas and the GOI but would not be a breakthrough.

Hale